

MAYOR'S RESPONSE TO THE ANIMAL PROTECTION TASK FORCE REPORT

The Mayor's Animal Protection Task Force was asked to examine, from a big picture, community-wide perspective, the issues surrounding animal over-population in Houston. Their detailed and thoughtful report reflects a significant amount of research and analysis on the part of the members. The report should be shared with the animal welfare community, because the solutions recommended by the Task Force reach well beyond the scope of the City's resources, and will require support from all sectors. The Task Force report makes dozens of recommendations which can be grouped into two broad categories: (1) changes in pet owners' and animal shelter practices; and (2) changes at the City's Bureau of Animal Regulation and Care. Our response to the recommendations is grouped accordingly.

Changes in pet owners' and animal shelter practices

A. Increasing adoptions and reducing euthanasia rates in area shelters

We certainly agree with the Task Force that increasing adoptions and reducing euthanasia rates are worthy goals, and that the community should adopt a multi-faceted long-range plan to achieve those goals. We would suggest that the best way to develop such a plan is through a community-based task force consisting of public employees, private shelter staff and interested community members. The plan should contain specific goals and objectives, with a timeline and a corresponding budget, including the identity of all sources of funding necessary to complete the plan. We will convene such a group to begin the process by March 31, 2006.

B. Multi-faceted, multi-media public education campaign

Public education is the key to changing people's attitudes and behaviors, and the report identifies numerous areas in which the public is not well informed, and that lack of information contributes to animal over-population. Specific actions the City will undertake include (1) conducting public education through BARC staff and Friends of BARC who will seek out opportunities through Super Neighborhood Councils, libraries and schools to engage with the public on animal welfare issues; (2) enhancing the BARC website so that it is a complete source for animal welfare information; and (3) engage volunteers in a more effective manner so they can supplement our staff's work. The City supports the idea of raising private funds, including in kind donations from media, to reach a variety of target audiences. We recommend that the messages be developed by communications professionals to increase the likelihood of success.

C. Spay/neuter programs

Clearly, the availability of spay/neuter services will contribute to a reduction in the number of unwanted and abandoned animals. The City expects to enter into a contract with Saving Animals under which Saving Animals will build a clinic on BARC's property to facilitate the spaying and neutering of more of the animals received at BARC. This will enable BARC to make more animals available for adoption. The Saving Animals clinic will also have a low cost wellness clinic for pet owners to access. The value of spay/neuter programs cannot be overstated, and BARC is committed to making the first dollars it gains through operational efficiencies available for additional spay/neuter services.

D. Reducing irresponsible pet breeding

This matter will be referred to the City Attorney to determine whether the City has the authority to legislate in this area. We believe a legal, and perhaps more effective approach to this problem, is public education. The public should learn about the true consequences of irresponsible breeding and be encouraged not to purchase from these breeders.

E. Restrictions on surrendering pets

The report's recommendations for subsidization of pet ownership (vet services, foster care, behavioral training, and pet food assistance) are more properly provided by private agencies with private dollars. We cannot utilize tax dollars to subsidize pet ownership. Many of these services are available in the market today, and in many cases are reasonably priced. The report also recommends that the City require pet owners to provide a certain level of vet care for their pets and to pay fees in order to abandon a pet at a shelter. The former suggestion is beyond the scope of the City's authority (we do not require that children be immunized). The latter suggestion merits further consideration in light of the experience of Richmond, however, we must be certain that imposing a fee on animal surrender does not lead to animal abandonment by those who do not want to or cannot pay the fee.

4. Returning lost pets to owners

Since September, BARC has scanned animals for identifying microchips to facilitate the return of lost pets to owners, and staff undertakes extensive efforts to locate owners, including sending ACO's to homes to notify owners that their pet is at BARC. The report's suggestion that ACO's return lost pets while in the field, rather than processing them through BARC, is well taken and is an operational efficiency which we will undertake. Regarding the need for a website for lost animals, we would refer this issue to the planning group. There are already two sites and perhaps their consolidation is in order.

5. Improvements at BARC

The report's recommended changes at BARC will be taken under advisement. As the report notes, BARC has been operating under a new management team, during which time many improvements have been realized. As this report indicates, as well as Controller Parker's performance audit, there are many opportunities for BARC to adopt new practices that will improve the welfare of the animals and bring operational efficiencies. Examples of such changes include engagement of the 3-1-1 system in call intake to expedite call handling; development and continuous measurement of performance standards for staff to ensure competency and efficiency in work practices; and overhaul of the ACO staffing pattern and work schedules to align workforce with demand.

6. Adoption program

We appreciate and accept the recommendation that a citywide shelter working group be convened to meet regularly and discuss common shelter issues, including adoption. Stephen Williams will spearhead this working group. Through this group, in coordination with the community-wide planning group, realistic goals for adoption at area shelters can be set.

7. Changing animal control ordinances

Many of the report's recommendation in this section and throughout the report require legal authority to enact ordinances governing the behavior of individuals and businesses. In many cases, the city lacks the authority to regulate in these areas; in some cases, the cost of enforcement is not justifiable; and in other cases, the recommendations are well-stated and will be considered by the City Attorney. Responding to the specific ordinances addressed in this section:

- (a) Required vet care—this is beyond the scope of the city's authority.
- (b) Kennel designation—we do not agree with this recommendation
- (c) Prohibition of animal cruelty—we will consult with the District Attorney on this recommendation
- (d) Adding citizens to the advisory board—we agree and have asked the City Attorney revise the ordinance for presentation to Council to add two citizen spots

8. Funding

The report's recommendation that the City review the fees it charges for animal-related services is well taken. We commit to review all fees and seek adjustments by Council as appropriate. We are also exploring ways in which the City and County can work more effectively together on animal welfare issues, including program management. A community-wide fundraising effort will be essential to implement many of the programmatic enhancements suggested by the report.